

EPA considers emergency declaration

1/11/02 The Missouri

Officials hope to remove Zonolite from Libby homes — without having to do the same thing in the rest of the country

By KATHLEEN McLAUGHLIN
Missouri State Journal

HELENA — Regional U.S. Environmental Protection Agency officials will soon ask their bosses in the Bush administration to declare a public health emergency in Libby, Minn., so they would allow the agency to remove Zonolite insulation from hundreds of area homes and schools.

The public health declaration is not a sure thing, and it's fraught with potential problems for both the EPA and W.R. Grace and Co., the Libby-based company that owned Libby's vermiculite mine, which once produced the asbestos-like Zonolite.

But top-level EPA officials said they likely will call on the emergency powers, which would allow the agency to consider the

nationalwide are insulated with Zonolite. The public health emergency label would let the agency tackle Libby's insulation issues as a special case, and potentially save the EPA from having to clean the product from thousands of homes across the country.

Before the EPA makes a final call, W.R. Grace and Co. brass will meet with top agency officials on Jan. 31 to voice their concerns about the proposed

Paul Peronard, the EPA's on-site coordinator in Libby, said there's evidence that Zonolite should be removed from homes in Libby, where residents have been exposed to dangerous asbestos from a number of sources. Peronard is writing a draft proposal for the health emergency declaration, which would give the agency leeway to remove Zonolite from Libby's buildings without binding it to such

action across the country.

Still, Peronard said, saying that Zonolite poses a health risk would be a major departure for the agency. In the past, the EPA has stood by the notion that such insulation products are not dangerous if handled properly. The agency's long-standing advice on Zonolite is to leave it alone.

For the past 20 years, Peronard said, the EPA has operated under the policy that the best way to handle the insulation is to "leave it in place and

See INSULATION, Page B6

FROM PAGE B1

Insulation

Continued

don't disturb it."

"If we decide there's a risk with Zonolite, from a policy perspective, it makes sense that we re-evaluate that for the rest of the country," said Peronard.

Talk of a public health declaration for Libby began in early September, when EPA Administrator Christie Whitman visited the town and said her agency was looking at the emergency declaration as a way to remove asbestos-laden vermiculite from the town's homes. U.S. Rep. Dennis Rehberg, R-Mont., has pushed for the declaration, saying that Libby's health problems are unique in the United States and deserve special attention.

Peronard said the insulation removal would probably include 800 or so homes and buildings in the Libby Valley, at a cost of anywhere from \$3,000 to \$20,000 per house, depending on the size of the job.

Libby's health problems came to national attention two years ago, when published reports linked asbestos contamination in the town to widespread illness and death. A federal health survey conducted last year found that 18 percent of nearly 6,000 adults tested had lung scarring likely related to

asbestos exposure. Until now, most of the cases have been tied to exposure to mine wastes, not actual commercial Zonolite from Libby.

While in full swing, Libby's mine produced the majority of the world's vermiculite, which, when heated and expanded was sold as Zonolite insulation. W.R. Grace and Co. stopped selling Zonolite in 1980 "for economic reasons," according to the company's Web site. The mine shut down 10 years later. W.R. Grace and Co. maintains that dangerous asbestos was removed from the vermiculite at the mine to ensure the product's safety.

It's unclear how many homes in the United States are insulated with Zonolite - estimates range from 800,000 to 15 million. But it's a good bet that the percentage is higher in Zonolite's hometown of Libby, where local residents for years could get free vermiculite from the company.

Bill Corcoran, W.R. Grace and Co.'s vice president for public and regulatory affairs, said Thursday he asked for the meeting with EPA's decision-makers on the emergency declaration because he wants to know the possible repercussions to the company. He acknowledged that one of his main concerns lies in the fact that Zonolite has never before been labeled as an unsafe product.

"We believe it's a safe product," said Corcoran.

Corcoran said Grace officials want to review the EPA's scientific basis for the declaration, and he noted that a judge in Washington state rejected claims that the insulation was unsafe.

"We want to be able to make sure we understand the science," said Corcoran.

Peronard, on the other hand, believes there are people who have been sickened from exposure primarily to Zonolite insulation. He pointed to the federal health study, which showed several sick people had primary asbestos exposure only through Zonolite. And he noted that he knows of workers such as electricians who are now sick.

Peronard said he expects to make his pitch to EPA officials in Washington, D.C., next week. Marianne Horinko, assistant administrator for the EPA Office of Solid Waste and Emergency Response, will then meet with Grace officials and make a decision on how to move forward.

"Obviously, if we do something in Libby, people are going to say, 'Why don't you do something with my situation,'" said Peronard. "It's more important to me, that, as an agency, we work out a rational policy."

"My job is to do what's right here," he added. "Somebody else needs to be looking out for the national implications."